United Nations E/CN.6/2015/INF/3

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
16 March 2015

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-ninth session
9-20 March 2015
Agenda item 3
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Ministerial round table: transforming politics and public life to achieve gender equality

Chair's summary

1. On 10 March 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women held a ministerial round table on the topic "Transforming politics and public life to achieve gender equality" under the overall theme "Priorities for future action to realize gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls". The participants in the round table focused on challenges in enhancing women's participation in decision-making and the way forward to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

2. The round table was chaired by the Director of the Institute for the Development of Women of El Salvador, Yanira Argueta, and moderated by the former Prime Minister of Senegal, Aminata Touré. In total, 29 ministers and high-level officials participated in the round table.

Strengthening women's participation, starting with political will

3. Participants confirmed the importance of institutional transformation to achieve gender equality in decision-making and leadership. They acknowledged that political will was necessary to ensure gender equality and noted that commitments and declarations had to be accompanied by actions and mechanisms to boost the participation and leadership of women.

4. A number of participants commented on the use of temporary special measures, including quotas, as a primary mechanism to increase women's political opportunities. High percentages of women in parliament were due in part to the implementation of quotas, although those worked best when supplemented by other measures, such as the reform of the electoral system; encouraging more transparent

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elections and ensuring the establishment of independent electoral commissions; and applying sanctions, including financial penalties, for non-compliance with quota legislation. Participants also discussed the financing of women's electoral campaigns.

5. A number of participants spoke of the importance of women's leadership and participation in other institutions and entities, including corporate boards, trade unions and business associations. Quotas were seen as an effective way of ensuring women's presence, with some States requiring that women constitute at least 30 per cent of corporate boards.

6. The role of political parties was discussed, as was the need to ensure women's increased participation, including by strategically positioning women in winnable positions on their candidate lists, or by supporting their campaigns through party funds. Some participants pointed to the need for greater transparency in the internal functioning of parties, for promoting gender equality more systematically through their structures and for party leaders to be trained in gender equality issues. In States where women were currently not represented at all in elected positions, or where they were significantly underrepresented, constitutional amendments were being considered to boost women's electoral prospects. In other States, there was an increasing trend to work towards parity between men and women.

7. In addition to the implementation of quotas, participants raised the need to run awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of women's electoral and political participation. The importance of working with men and boys to advance gender equality was also underscored. Some participants stressed the need to strengthen solidarity among women.

8. Participants also stressed the need to build the capacity of women to participate in politics. The importance of universal education policies and the economic empowerment of women was underlined. Participants mentioned the need to enhance women's political skills at all levels of government and to create incentives for women's leadership at the subnational level.

9. The role of women's organizations at the grassroots level was highlighted in nurturing the interest and activism of women in politics, but also in holding Governments accountable for their commitments to increase the participation of women. Participants stressed the need to develop indicators and statistics to monitor progress and setbacks.

10. Some participants noted the need to sign and ratify international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and to ensure that enshrining gender equality in national constitutions became a priority. The topics of developing and implementing national strategies and action plans for gender equality, and of agreeing on lines of responsibility for those actions were also discussed.

Transforming institutions and creating enabling environments

11. The transformation of political institutions to ensure the achievement of gender equality was recognized as a priority for accelerating the implementation of the Platform for Action. There was agreement that transformed institutions required the equal participation of men and women at all levels, including in leadership

positions. Ensuring gender balance was seen as a first step towards more gender-sensitive legislation, policies and decisions.

12. Instituting gender mainstreaming strategies, gender budgeting and facilitating gender audits in public institutions were seen as critical steps in ensuring that institutions addressed gender equality concerns. Participants stressed the importance of developing tangible tools to incorporate gender equality concerns in the work of both public and private sector institutions. Dedicated mechanisms, such as women's caucuses, committees or networks of gender focal points, were seen as critical for entrenching gender mainstreaming and required access to sound gender analysis, research and sex disaggregated data.

13. Participants also noted the importance of partnerships of gender equality machineries and civil society organizations with other stakeholders. The need to support the coordination role of gender equality machineries and their mandate as catalysts for gender mainstreaming was stressed. The view was expressed that the full and effective participation of women required a link among parliament, Government and women's civil society organizations. Such organizations had been successful in keeping Governments accountable for gender equality actions and commitments. In some States, gender observatories had been established to measure and monitor progress and setbacks.

14. It was widely recognized, however, that institutional transformation would not be achieved unless responsibility for unpaid care work was shared between men and women. In many countries, women spent a disproportionate amount of time on childcare and household responsibilities. Encouraging women's paid work and providing universal childcare facilities were seen as critical in redressing that inequality. There was agreement upon the importance of women's economic independence and of a guarantee of decent work and equal pay for work of equal value.

15. Addressing the institutional environment in which women and men worked was also considered important in achieving gender equality. Some participants stressed the need to ensure that men and women were able to work together on issues of gender equality, in an environment free from sexual harassment and discrimination. A number of participants called for a paradigm shift to address the attitudinal barriers about women's roles. Participants were keen to promote role models of women in leadership positions, capable of managing resources.

Inclusive institutions

16. Participants stressed that women were not a homogenous group. To ensure the participation of the most marginalized women, they underlined the need to create consultative mechanisms and engage a diverse range of women. They also stressed the importance of addressing women's poverty and marginalization and noted that quotas had been a useful mechanism in overcoming intersecting forms of discrimination. There was a special focus on the importance of building the capacity of young women to advocate gender equality.

17. The importance of proposed sustainable development goal 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, and the need to incorporate gender equality into all sustainable development goals were highlighted. *Participants raised the issue of financing for gender equality to ensure the*

implementation of the sustainable development goals and, thereby, the full and equal participation of women in all areas and at all levels. The role of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) was noted as key in that process.